CONSCIOUS WRITING

The 5 Most Commonly Misused Words in Medical Writing (According to an Editor)

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"A word after a word after a word is power."
– Margaret Atwood

Words are powerful. They may deceptively look like simple little strings of letters, but they hold the tremendous power of influence. The words we choose—and where we place them—influence thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

Clear words support clear thinking. And clear writing and clear thinking go hand in hand.

Yet, some writers will throw words on the page, hoping that readers will "get the idea." But when you use words that are ambiguous, inaccurate, or imprecise, you encourage ambiguous, inaccurate, and imprecise thinking. This carelessness can cause death by a thousand cuts—each word misuse can chip away at the clarity and credibility of the work.

This chipping away can involve any one of the hundreds of thousands of words in the English language. But as a professional editor, I have noticed 5 words that are most commonly misused in medical writing: *utilize*, *increase*, *level*, *while*, and *comprise*.

UTILIZE

Many writers write *utilize* as a synonym for *use*. But these words have different meanings. *Use* generally means to put something into action or service, whereas *utilize* means to make use of. Although these definitions may seem similar, the definition of *utilize* can suggest the discovery of a new, profitable, or practical use for something.

As a general example, imagine—or maybe you can simply recall a recent memory—that you need to remove ice from your windshield, but you don't have an ice scraper. You might utilize a kitchen spatula for the task. The spatula was not designed to remove the ice, but it does the trick.

In science and medicine, you might utilize something for a purpose that it was not designed to fulfill, such as a Petri dish for storing office supplies or a belt for a medical emergency.

To ensure your writing is clear, default to writing the word *use*, and only write *utilize* when the term is the more accurate choice. Better yet, skip the word *utilize* altogether, and stick with the more readable word *use*, which can always replace *utilize*.

Examples
The researcher *used* a Petri dish to grow bacteria.
The researcher *utilized* a Petri dish to store paperclips on their desk.
The researcher *used* a Petri dish to store paperclips on their desk.

The emergency responder *used* a band of rubber as a tourniquet.
The emergency responder *utilized* a belt as a tourniquet.
The emergency responder *used* a belt as a tourniquet.

INCREASE

Many writers use the term *increase* (or, conversely, *decrease*) to describe differences in data. However, they do not always consider nuances in the meaning of this term.

Increase means to make or become progressively greater in size, amount, number, or intensity. Based on this definition, *increase* infers a change over time or a cause-effect relationship.

But what many writers do is misuse *increase* to describe differences between groups of data. Most often, this misuse looks like *increase* paired with *versus, than, compared to*, or *compared with*. In these cases, the more accurate phrasing would be to use *higher* or *greater*.

To ensure accuracy in your writing, only use *increase* when referring to changes over time or a cause-effect relationship. And use *higher* or *greater* to refer to differences between groups of data.

Examples
The prevalence of diabetes *increased* from 0.93% in 1958 to 7.4% in 2015.

Epinephrine *increases* heart rate and cardiac output.

Urine albumin was *higher* in patients with kidney disease than in healthy patients.

The concentration of red blood cells was *greater* in patients treated with the drug versus those who took a placebo.

High sugar consumption for 4 weeks *increased* body weight by 1 pound each week.

The drug *increased* liver function in patients with hepatitis C.

LEVEL

Some writers use *level* as a synonym for the words *amount*, *concentration*, or *content*. These latter 3 words have fairly simple definitions. *Amount* means the total number or quantity. *Concentration* means the amount of a component in a given area or volume. And *content* means the amount of a specified material.

But the definition of *level* is not as simple. In fact, *level* has several meanings, including a concentration of something, a position in a scale, a measurement or index of altitude, or the magnitude of a quantity related to another value. *Level* can also be used to refer to even or unvarying height, or to a device that helps to establish a horizontal line or plane. All these different meanings can create confusion for readers.

To ensure that the writing is clear and easy to understand, default to using *amount, concentration*, and *content*. Only use *level* when no other word will do.

Examples

The treatment increased the *concentration* of antibodies in the blood stream.

The drug reduced the *amount* of tumor necrosis factor.

The bone was *leveled* during the osteotomy.

WHILE

While is another word that can trip up writers. Many writers use *while, although*, and *whereas* interchangeably. But *while* is not an accurate synonym for *although* or *whereas*.

Although means in spite of something or even though, and *whereas* means on the contrary or in view of. These definitions are fairly straightforward.

The definition of *while* is not as straightforward because the word has multiple meanings. *While* can mean during a certain time, as long as, on the other hand, and at the same time as something. These definitions mean that *while* can sometimes be used instead of *although* or *whereas*, but not always. Even still, why risk confusing readers by making them figure out which meaning of *while* you intend?

To ensure clarity, use *while* only when referring to time. Otherwise, use a term with a more precise meaning, such as *although* or *whereas*—or even a more readable word such as *and* or *but*.

Examples

The pharmacist prepared the prescription *while* the patient waited in the lobby.

Although the patient adhered to the treatment plan, their insomnia persisted.

Drug A reduced blood pressure by 10%, *whereas* Drug B reduced blood pressure by 15%.

The resident performed the surgery, *and* the attending oversaw the procedure.

The drug slowed heart rate, *but* it did not lower blood pressure.

COMPRISE

Many writers misuse the word *comprise* in their writing. How? They erroneously follow *comprise* with the word *of*.

In these cases, writers are likely confusing *comprise* with the term *compose*. But these terms have opposite meanings. *Comprise* means to include or be made up of (ie, A *comprises* X, Y, and Z), whereas *compose* means to form by putting together or to constitute (ie, X, Y, and Z *compose* A). To give *compose* a similar meaning to *comprise*, the word must be sandwiched between a weak "to be" verb (eg, *is, are, was, were*) and the word *of* (eg, *was composed of*).

Alternatively, writers may use *comprise* as a synonym for *consists*. Unlike with *compose*, *comprise* and *consists* have similar meanings. *Comprise* means to include or be made up of, and *consists* means to be composed or made up of. But, grammatically, only the word *consists* should be followed by the word *of*.

To ensure clarity and accuracy, use *comprise* without *of*, or use *consists* instead. And if you are tempted to use the sandwiched form of *compose*, stick with either *comprise* or *consists* to reduce the word count and give your sentence a little readability boost.

Examples

The complex is *composed* of 3 proteins.
The solution *consists* of 4 chemicals.
The team *comprises* a physician, nurse practitioner, and resident.

KEEPING UP WITH CHANGE

Language constantly evolves, so the meanings of these words and how they are used may change in the future. The key is to stay updated on these changes so that you can use the most explicit, accurate, and precise words in your writing. In this way, you can harness the full power of words to craft clear writing that supports clear thinking and credible work.